

Does the Democracy Matter?

Party Facebook Engagement in Six Smaller European Democracies, 2010 to 2020

Tristan Hotham*

2026

Preprint, not peer reviewed

Abstract

Does the state of a country's democracy show up in how people engage with its parties on Facebook? I use 184,317 posts from 35 official party pages in Finland, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Switzerland, posted between 2010 and October 2020, with 60.6 million interactions, collected through CrowdTangle. I join them to country-year indicators from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project: electoral democracy, polarisation of society and hate speech by political parties. Engagement is organised by audience and by who owns the page, not by the regime. One page held 72% of all interactions in Romania and one held 51% in Switzerland, against 23% to 39% in the other four countries. Across the six countries, no V-Dem indicator is clearly related to engagement per post, engagement per follower, the angry share of reactions or the share of interactions that are shares, and with six countries no rank correlation can be told from chance. Within countries over time, none of the 18 main estimates has a bootstrap p-value below 0.05. The nearest is a link between polarisation and engagement ($p = 0.06$ to 0.09), but it disappears when I drop 2020, the Covid year, and it weakens when I control for followers. With six countries the design can rule out only large associations. Engagement on party pages is not a usable measure of how democratic a country is.

Keywords: Facebook; social media engagement; political parties; democracy; V-Dem; Europe; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

In a pooled European sample, the smaller democracies contribute only a few pages each and are rarely looked at on their own. They differ from each other in ways that might matter for how people engage with parties online. They differ in how polarised their societies are, how often parties use hate speech, and how secure their democratic institutions are. A natural question is whether any of this shows up in the attention that parties' Facebook pages receive.

I ask it with data I already hold. My CrowdTangle exports from 2020 cover party pages in Portugal, Finland, Slovenia, Romania, Switzerland and Lithuania, and a few politicians' pages in Latvia. These countries appear in my earlier pooled study of populist parties (Hotham 2026), but not on their own, and

*Independent researcher. ORCID 0000-0003-4931-9349. Correspondence: contact@tristanhotham.com. The views expressed are the author's own and do not represent those of any employer.

the question there was different. Here I pair the pages with the V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al. 2026b), which scores every country every year on a large number of democracy indicators, including three that I would expect to matter: electoral democracy, polarisation of society and hate speech by political parties.

I ask four questions. **RQ1.** How is engagement on party pages distributed in these six countries, and how much of it do the largest pages take? **RQ2.** Do countries with different V-Dem scores differ in engagement per post, engagement per follower, concentration or the share of angry reactions? **RQ3.** When the same pages face a change in their country's V-Dem scores from one year to the next, does their engagement change? **RQ4.** Do any of these answers survive reasonable changes to the design?

The answers are mostly negative, and I report them as such. The distribution of engagement differs a great deal between countries, and it is organised by page size and ownership. The V-Dem indicators do not explain it. The one pattern that comes close to the usual thresholds, a link between societal polarisation and engagement, rests on the year 2020 and does not survive dropping it. With six countries and slowly moving indicators, the study has little power, and I say what it could and could not have detected.

2 Background and expectations

I have three expectations, each with a plausible reason, none strongly grounded in earlier findings.

Polarisation. Posts about political out-groups drive engagement more than posts about in-groups (Rathje et al. 2021), and in a comparative study of politicians' posts, negativity and emotion raised engagement (Hameleers et al. 2021), as did a self-centred style in 12 European countries (Bene et al. 2022). In a more polarised society there are more out-groups to attack and more supporters who want to see it. I therefore expect more engagement per post, and a larger share of angry reactions, where V-Dem scores a society as more polarised.

Hate speech. Where major parties use hate speech more often, party pages might draw angrier reactions, and more sharing as supporters pass on content they approve of. Populist communication on social media has been described as fragmented (Engesser et al. 2017) and as having an elective affinity with the platform (Gerbaudo 2018), but I know of no test of its link to a country-level score for hate speech.

Democratic quality. Electoral democracy is the weakest case. Where democratic institutions are weaker, online attention might gather around a few pages, either the governing party or the main challenger, because other parties have less room to campaign. I therefore expect more concentration where electoral democracy scores are lower. I have no strong expectation for engagement per post.

Audience. Engagement depends on how many people follow a page. I treat the audience as the first thing to account for, because any difference between countries in the size of their pages could look like an effect of something else.

3 Data

3.1 Facebook pages

The posts come from CrowdTangle, Facebook's public-content tool, which I used to export the historical posts of saved lists of party and politician pages in October 2020 (Facebook 2020). Each record is a post with its time, type, the number of page likes at posting, and counts of likes, comments, shares and, from

February 2016, the reactions love, wow, haha, sad, angry and care. I define *interactions* as the sum of all of these. Page likes at posting are recorded for almost no posts before 2015 and for most posts from 2016, so I use followers only from 2016.

The exports for these countries cover 303,739 posts. The main sample is the official national party pages: 35 pages in Finland (8), Lithuania (4), Portugal (11), Romania (3), Slovenia (6) and Switzerland (3), listed in Appendix Table 6. In Portugal I leave out Esquerda Net, which is the news portal of the Left Bloc rather than a party page, and the exports' separate list of 68 politicians' pages, which I have not coded by role. Latvia has only politicians' pages, so it cannot enter a party-page analysis. Estonia is not in the data. The Baltic states are therefore represented by Lithuania alone.

Coverage inside each country is partial. The sample has only three parties in Romania, and for example CDS-PP and the Left Bloc's own page are absent in Portugal. Appendix Table 6 lists what I have, and the earlier populist paper lists which major parties are missing (Hotham 2026). I keep posts from January 2010 to the end of October 2020; the exports end on 28 October 2020, so 2020 is a partial year.

I aggregate to page-years and keep page-years with at least 30 posts. This gives 294 page-years for 35 pages, from 12 page-years in 2010 to 35 in 2019. The sample therefore grows over the decade, mainly because pages were added or began posting.

3.2 V-Dem indicators

I use V-Dem version 16 (Coppedge et al. 2026b,a). All indicators are expert-coded and combined by a Bayesian measurement model (Pemstein et al. 2026), and are scored for each country-year. I use three. *Electoral democracy* is the V-Dem polyarchy index, which runs from 0 to 1. *Polarisation of society* (v2smpolsoc) is the answer to "how would you characterize the differences of opinions on major political issues in this society?", from serious polarisation to no polarisation. *Party hate speech* (v2smpolhate) is the answer to "how often do major political parties use hate speech as part of their rhetoric?" The last two are on an interval scale that runs roughly from -3 to $+4$ and are coded so that higher means less polarisation and less hate speech. To read results in the natural direction I reverse both, so that in this paper higher always means more polarised and more hate speech.

Table 1 shows the indicators. Two features matter for what follows. First, the countries differ a lot in levels: Romania has the lowest electoral democracy score (0.71), and Slovenia and Finland sit at the two ends of the polarisation scale in my sample. Second, within a country the polarisation and hate-speech series move in steps, often staying flat for years and then changing in one year, and many of the changes come in 2020. Slovenia's electoral democracy score falls from 0.81 to 0.75 in 2020, and Romania's rises from 0.67 to 0.81 over the decade.

4 Method

Descriptive. For each country I report posts, interactions, median and mean interactions per post, the share of all interactions that went to the single largest page, the angry share of reactions (2016 to 2020, when reactions exist), the share of interactions that are shares and comments, and median interactions per 1,000 followers (2016 to 2020).

Between countries. With six countries, I compare country-level outcomes with country means of the V-Dem indicators using Spearman rank correlations. I do not use a standard test: I give the exact

Table 1. V-Dem indicators for the six countries, 2010 to 2020. Polarisation and hate speech are reversed so that higher means more. “Min–max” covers 2010 to 2019.

Country	Electoral democracy			Polarisation of society			Party hate speech		
	Mean	Min–max	2020	Mean	Min–max	2020	Mean	Min–max	2020
Finland	0.881	0.869 to 0.891	0.880	–2.61	–2.86 to –2.43	–2.60	–1.86	–1.90 to –1.52	–1.90
Lithuania	0.827	0.808 to 0.850	0.802	–2.10	–2.11 to –2.11	–2.02	–2.98	–3.18 to –2.50	–2.52
Portugal	0.889	0.884 to 0.899	0.886	–0.56	–0.56 to –0.53	–0.86	–2.19	–2.41 to –1.19	–1.19
Romania	0.710	0.672 to 0.750	0.805	0.15	–0.23 to 0.48	0.69	–0.65	–0.89 to –0.16	–0.32
Slovenia	0.843	0.814 to 0.873	0.752	1.35	0.68 to 1.60	2.17	0.65	0.43 to 1.10	1.55
Switzerland	0.902	0.895 to 0.907	0.902	0.39	0.19 to 0.37	0.79	–0.70	–0.89 to –0.55	–0.55

permutation p -value, from all 720 orderings of the six countries. With six countries the smallest attainable two-sided p is 0.003, and a rank correlation of at least 0.94 is needed to reach $p < 0.05$ (0.83 gives $p = 0.06$).

Within countries. I regress a page-year outcome on one V-Dem indicator at a time, with page fixed effects and year fixed effects:

$$y_{pt} = \alpha_p + \gamma_t + \beta x_{c(p)t} + \varepsilon_{pt}, \quad (1)$$

where x is a V-Dem score for the page’s country. The page effects remove all fixed differences between pages and countries. The year effects remove anything that moved all countries together, including the rise in engagement in 2020. What identifies β is a country’s deviation from its own average and the common trend. I scale each indicator by the pooled within-country standard deviation, so β is the change in the outcome for a one-standard-deviation change within a country. These standard deviations are 0.02 for electoral democracy, 0.18 for polarisation and 0.35 for hate speech, and the first is small because most country-years change by very little.

Because the indicators vary only by country and year, standard errors must allow for dependence within countries, and there are six clusters. Conventional cluster-robust standard errors are too small with so few clusters. I therefore report p -values from a wild cluster bootstrap- t with the null imposed and six-point weights (Cameron et al. 2008; Webb 2023), using 1,999 draws in the main models and 999 in robustness runs. I also report the range of the estimate when each country is left out in turn. The intervals in Figure 2 are conventional cluster-robust intervals and are too narrow with six clusters, so the p -values are the guide.

Outcomes. The outcomes are the log of median interactions per post, the log of posts per year, the angry share of reactions (2016 to 2020), the share of interactions that are shares, the share that are comments, and the log of median interactions per 1,000 followers (2016 to 2020).

What I could detect. A design with six countries has little power. Between six countries, only a rank correlation of at least 0.94 reaches $p < 0.05$. I can say little about modest associations, and the estimates below should be read as showing what the data allow, not as evidence that nothing is there.

Table 2. Party pages by country, January 2010 to October 2020. Angry share is the share of reactions that are angry, 2016 to 2020. The last column is the geometric mean over page-years of median interactions per post per 1,000 followers, 2016 to 2020. Page-years have at least 30 posts.

Country	Pages	Page-years	Posts	Inter-actions (m)	Median per post	Mean per post	Top page share	Angry share	Per 1,000 followers
Finland	8	79	39,211	6.3	52	160	23%	1.9%	7.5
Lithuania	4	40	13,046	1.8	58	137	33%	2.7%	6.2
Portugal	11	76	65,077	14.5	65	223	24%	4.2%	2.5
Romania	3	23	26,627	32.6	259	1223	72%	7.2%	3.5
Slovenia	6	46	30,826	3.8	40	124	39%	3.8%	7.7
Switzerland	3	30	9,530	1.7	50	173	51%	6.7%	6.6
All	35	294	184,317	60.6					

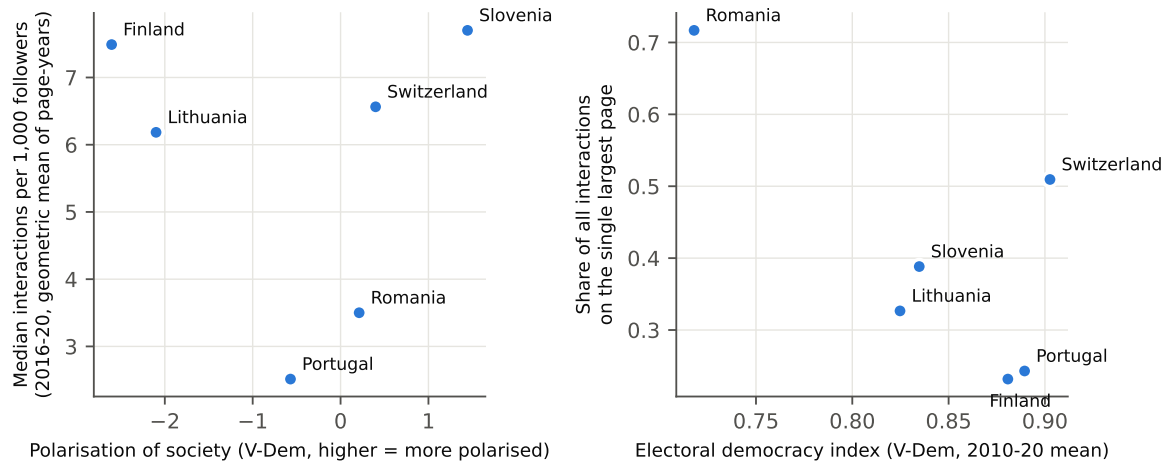


Figure 1. Country means. Left: engagement per 1,000 followers (2016 to 2020) against V-Dem polarisation of society, with higher meaning more polarised. Right: share of all interactions on the largest page against V-Dem electoral democracy. Six countries; no relationship is distinguishable from chance (Table 3).

5 Results

5.1 Engagement in six systems

Table 2 describes the sample. Interactions are very unevenly spread between countries and pages. Romania has three pages and 32.6 million interactions, more than the other five countries combined (28.0 million). Its median post drew 259 interactions, against 40 to 65 elsewhere, and its mean post 1,223, against 124 to 223. This is one page: the National Liberal Party (PNL) took 72% of the Romanian total. In Switzerland the SVP took 51%. In the other four countries the largest page took between 23% and 39%.

Adjusting for audience changes the ranking. Per 1,000 followers, Slovenian and Finnish pages did best (7.7 and 7.5), then Switzerland (6.6) and Lithuania (6.2), with Romania (3.5) and Portugal (2.5) lowest. Romanian pages are very large, with the PNL page median followers of 274,000 over its life, so a high number of interactions per post is a smaller number per follower. Portugal's low figure reflects a few very large audiences, including PAN and the PSD with about 146,000 followers each. The angry share of reactions is highest in Romania (7.2%) and Switzerland (6.7%) and lowest in Finland (1.9%) and Lithuania (2.7%). Engagement per post scales close to one for one with page size: within a page over time, with year effects, a 1% rise in followers goes with a rise of about 1.1% in median interactions per post (cluster-robust standard error 0.4, 129 page-years, 2016 to 2020).

Table 3. Spearman rank correlations between country means of each V-Dem indicator and each country-level outcome, with exact permutation p -values in parentheses. Six countries. Polarisation and hate speech are reversed so that higher means more.

Country-level outcome	Electoral democracy	Polarisation	Party hate speech
Interactions per 1,000 followers	+0.09 (0.92)	+0.26 (0.66)	+0.49 (0.36)
Median interactions per post	−0.43 (0.42)	−0.43 (0.42)	−0.37 (0.50)
Top page share	−0.31 (0.56)	+0.71 (0.14)	+0.60 (0.24)
Angry share of reactions	−0.03 (1.00)	+0.60 (0.24)	+0.43 (0.42)
Share of interactions that are shares	+0.43 (0.42)	+0.49 (0.36)	+0.09 (0.92)
Share that are comments	−0.20 (0.71)	+0.26 (0.66)	−0.03 (1.00)

Table 4. Within-country estimates: coefficient on each V-Dem indicator per one pooled within-country standard deviation, with page and year fixed effects, and wild cluster bootstrap p -value in parentheses (six country clusters). Log outcomes are in log points, so 0.1 is about 10%. Shares are proportions, so 0.003 is 0.3 percentage points. Polarisation and hate speech are reversed so that higher means more.

Outcome	Page-years	Electoral democracy	Polarisation	Party hate speech
Log median interactions per post	294	+0.010 (0.96)	+0.097 (0.09)	−0.045 (0.94)
Log posts per year	294	−0.011 (0.80)	−0.007 (0.93)	+0.146 (0.18)
Log interactions per 1,000 followers (2016–20)	138	−0.016 (0.94)	+0.049 (0.06)	+0.059 (0.48)
Angry share of reactions (2016–20)	162	+0.001 (0.62)	+0.001 (0.71)	+0.003 (0.11)
Share of interactions that are shares	294	+0.004 (0.64)	+0.006 (0.35)	−0.002 (0.81)
Share that are comments	294	+0.002 (0.92)	+0.005 (0.24)	+0.003 (0.36)

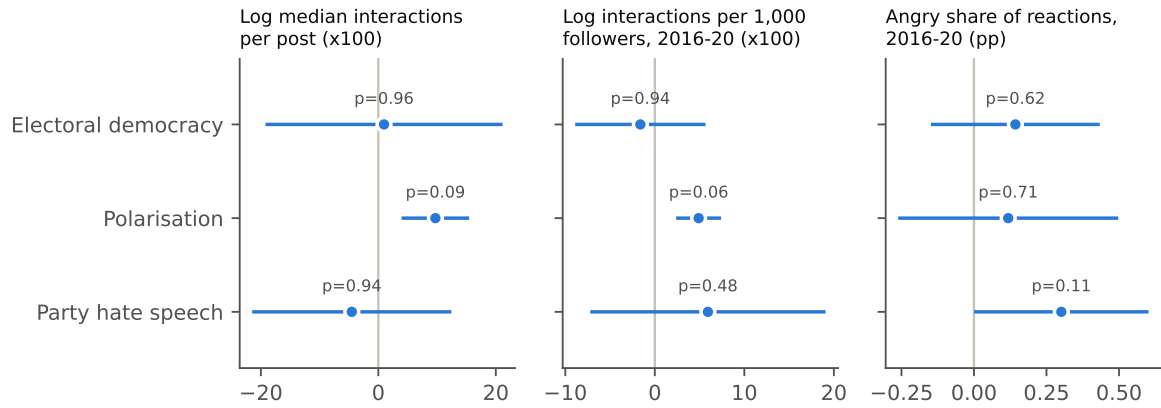
5.2 Between countries

Table 3 reports rank correlations. None is distinguishable from chance with six countries. The strongest is between polarisation and the share held by the largest page (+0.71, $p = 0.14$), and between electoral democracy and engagement per post it is −0.43 ($p = 0.42$). The pattern I expected for democratic quality, with more concentration where electoral democracy is lower, is there in sign (−0.31) but weak ($p = 0.56$). Romania is the outlier on engagement per post, concentration and the angry share, and with one country carrying a pattern it cannot be separated from anything else that sets Romania apart, such as a single dominant page.

5.3 Within countries over time

Table 4 gives the within-country estimates, and Figure 2 plots three of the outcomes. None of the 18 main estimates has a bootstrap p -value below 0.05; the smallest is 0.063. Electoral democracy is unrelated to every outcome: its largest coefficient is on log posts per year (−0.011, $p = 0.80$). Party hate speech has no clear link to the angry share of reactions: the estimate is +0.003 (that is, 0.3 percentage points per standard deviation), and $p = 0.11$. Hate speech goes with more posting (+0.146 log points, $p = 0.18$), which is also not distinguishable from chance.

Polarisation is the one indicator that comes close. A one-standard-deviation rise in polarisation (0.18 on the interval scale) goes with about 10% more interactions per post (+0.097, $p = 0.09$), and about 5% more per 1,000 followers (+0.049, $p = 0.06$). The direction matches what I expected. Leaving out any one country leaves the sign unchanged, and the estimates stay between +0.065 and +0.147.



Change per one within-country standard deviation of the indicator (point estimate, cluster-robust 95% interval; p from wild cluster bootstrap)

Figure 2. Within-country estimates for three outcomes. Dots are point estimates and lines are conventional cluster-robust 95% intervals, which are too narrow with six clusters, so the p -values (wild cluster bootstrap) are the better guide. Estimates are per one pooled within-country standard deviation of each indicator.

Table 5. Polarisation and engagement: robustness. Coefficient per within-country standard deviation, with wild cluster bootstrap p -value and number of page-years in parentheses. “–” means the specification does not apply.

Specification	Log median per post	Log per 1,000 followers
Main (2010–20)	+0.097 (0.09; n=294)	+0.049 (0.06; n=138)
2015–20 only	+0.079 (0.07; n=190)	–
2016–20 with log followers	+0.040 (0.30; n=129)	–
Without 2020 (2010–19)	+0.039 (0.62; n=261)	+0.008 (0.94; n=105)
Leave one country out (range)	+0.065 to +0.147	+0.037 to +0.060

5.4 Robustness

The polarisation estimate does not survive the checks (Table 5). It is smaller when I restrict to 2015 to 2020 (+0.079, $p = 0.07$) and again when I control for followers (+0.040, $p = 0.30$, 129 page-years). When I drop 2020 the estimate falls to +0.039 ($p = 0.62$) for engagement per post and to +0.008 ($p = 0.94$) per follower. The V-Dem polarisation series barely moves before 2020 in most of these countries (Table 1), and 2020 is also the year when engagement rose in all six countries because of the first wave of Covid-19. The year effects remove the common rise, but not country-specific differences in how 2020 changed, and the polarisation estimate is largely a comparison of those. I read it as most likely reflecting the Covid year, and not as evidence that polarisation raises engagement.

Over all the robustness runs, which add 66 tests to the 18 main ones, two have $p < 0.05$: shares of interactions that are shares against polarisation in the model with followers ($p = 0.008$), and comments against hate speech in the 2015 to 2020 sample ($p = 0.016$). Neither appears in the main specification or in the run without 2020. With 84 tests, about four would be expected below 0.05 by chance, so I do not treat either as a finding.

6 Discussion

The six countries differ a lot in how Facebook engagement with their parties is distributed. In Romania, and to a lesser degree Switzerland, a single page takes most of the engagement; elsewhere it is spread more evenly across six to eleven pages. Engagement per follower is a better guide to how people responded than raw interactions, and it puts Slovenia and Finland at the top and Portugal at the bottom. The best single predictor of a page's engagement is its audience: engagement per post scales close to proportionally with followers within a page.

The V-Dem indicators do not explain these differences in any way the data can establish. I do not read that as evidence of no relationship. A six-country comparison can detect only very large associations, and the within-country design depends on a few country-years when V-Dem scores changed. The failure to find an effect should be read the same way as an underpowered null in any small study: the estimates are not zero, and they are very uncertain. What the paper does show is that the strong claims are not supported here. In this sample, a weaker democracy does not mean a more concentrated set of party pages in any way I can distinguish from chance, and the most-polarised country does not have the angriest reactions.

The one result that came near the usual thresholds shows a practical lesson. A variable that moves in steps, with most of its movement in one unusual year, can produce a suggestive coefficient that is really about that year. Here the year is 2020, and the coefficient fell to nothing when I dropped it.

Limits. There are six countries, and with a single page doing most of the work in Romania, any country-level pattern is partly a story about one page. The page lists are partial, and in Romania cover only three parties. The V-Dem indicators are expert ratings of the whole country, not of social media, and polarisation of society is not Facebook polarisation. They are annual and change slowly, which limits what a within-country design can learn. Interactions are not support, and include engagement from opponents and, possibly, paid promotion. 2020 is a partial year, and the exports hold the posts that were still public when I collected them. Latvia and Estonia could not be included, so the Baltic states are represented by Lithuania only. I have run many tests with no correction and I report all of them.

7 Conclusion

In six smaller European democracies, the Facebook engagement of parties tracks audience and page ownership, not the V-Dem measures of how democratic, polarised or hateful the country is. The nearest thing to a link, between societal polarisation and engagement, disappears when the Covid year is dropped. With six countries I cannot rule out modest associations, but I find no support for the idea that engagement on party pages is a usable measure of the health of a democracy. A study that wanted to test it properly would need more countries, more years in which V-Dem scores actually change, and a measure of polarisation on the platform itself.

Data and code

The data were exported from CrowdTangle. In line with CrowdTangle's terms, I do not publish post-level data and I do not quote posts. The page-year panel used here, with the V-Dem indicators attached, and the analysis code are available from the author. V-Dem version 16 is available from <https://v-dem.net>.

Provenance and AI use

The data were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020 for my doctoral research. This paper builds on my doctoral thesis (Hotham 2021). The analysis and writing were completed in 2026.

The analysis code and drafts of the text were prepared with the assistance of an AI system (Claude, by Anthropic), which was also used to review drafts. I checked the analysis and the text and take responsibility for both.

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A Pages in the sample

Table 6. Party pages in the main sample, with the years in which they have at least 30 posts in a year, total posts and interactions. Page-years with fewer than 30 posts are excluded.

Country	Page	Years	Posts	Interactions (000)
Finland	Vasemmistoliitto	2010–2020	6,085	1,451
Finland	Sosialidemokraatit SDP	2010–2020	5,380	1,225
Finland	Vihreät - De Gröna	2010–2020	7,434	986
Finland	Kokoomus	2011–2020	3,527	852
Finland	Keskusta	2010–2020	5,118	686
Finland	Kristillisdemokraatit	2010–2020	7,780	673
Finland	Svenska folkpartiet i Finland - RKP	2010–2020	2,903	246
Finland	Liike Nyt	2018–2020	984	141
Lithuania	Tėvynės sąjunga - Lietuvos krikščionys demokratai (TS-LKD)	2011–2020	3,219	583
Lithuania	Lietuvos valstiečių ir žaliųjų sąjunga	2012–2020	3,348	567
Lithuania	Liberalai	2010–2020	2,448	393
Lithuania	Lietuvos socialdemokratų partija - LSDP	2011–2020	4,031	242
Portugal	PAN - Pessoas Animais Natureza	2015–2020	6,988	3,533
Portugal	Partido Social Democrata	2010–2020	13,602	2,706
Portugal	Partido Socialista	2011–2020	8,568	2,085
Portugal	Iniciativa Liberal	2018–2020	1,519	1,960
Portugal	PNR - Partido Nacional Renovador	2010–2020	13,030	1,500
Portugal	PCP - Partido Comunista Português	2017–2020	4,284	1,073
Portugal	Nós, Cidadãos	2014–2019	2,490	663
Portugal	CDU - Coligação Democrática Unitária	2011–2019	2,322	322
Portugal	LIVRE	2013–2020	2,937	304
Portugal	Aliança	2018–2020	1,600	215
Portugal	Partido Ecologista "Os Verdes"	2011–2020	7,737	176
Romania	Partidul Național Liberal	2011–2020	17,280	23,342
Romania	Uniunea Salvați România - USR	2016–2020	5,259	4,756
Romania	Partidul Social Democrat	2013–2020	4,088	4,464
Slovenia	Levica	2014–2020	4,495	1,483
Slovenia	SDS - Slovenska demokratska stranka	2010–2020	12,595	1,141
Slovenia	Socialni demokrati (SD)	2011–2020	4,290	404
Slovenia	Stranka LMŠ	2018–2020	1,653	403
Slovenia	NSi	2012–2020	6,033	320
Slovenia	DeSUS - Demokratična stranka upokojenцев Slovenije	2014–2020	1,760	67
Switzerland	SVP Schweiz	2013–2020	2,529	840
Switzerland	SP Schweiz	2010–2020	3,595	602
Switzerland	FDP	2010–2020	3,406	207